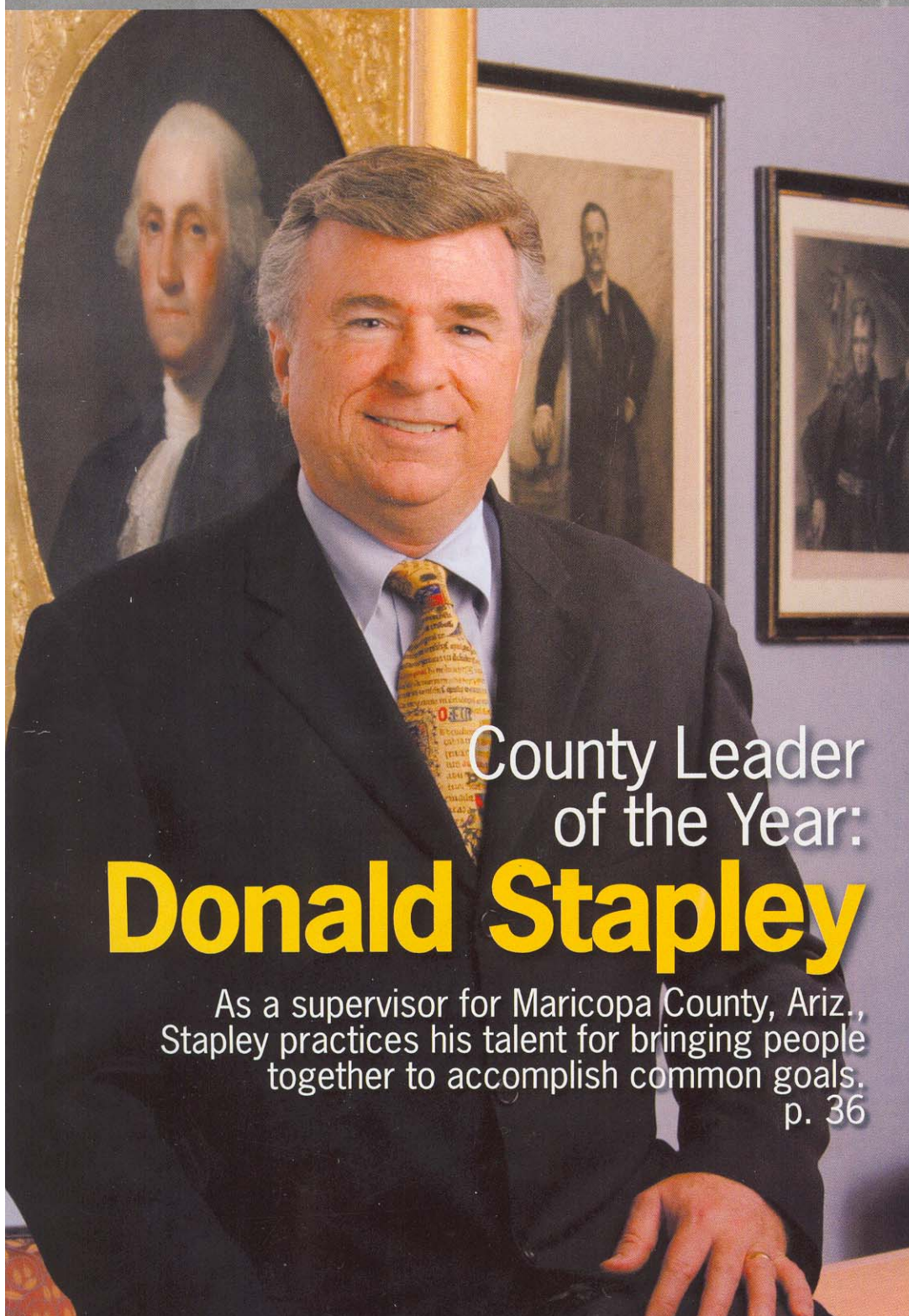


# AMERICAN CITY & COUNTY

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## County Leader of the Year: **Donald Stapley**

As a supervisor for Maricopa County, Ariz., Stapley practices his talent for bringing people together to accomplish common goals.  
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## CAN WE **COUNT** ON IT?

Some people cast doubts on electronic voting p. 30



## WHERE DID **THE BUCK** **STOP?**

First responders have not received billions in aid p. 41





By Lindsay Isaacs

A few years ago, Donald Stapley was pulled into a rocky land deal that tested his mettle. Cave Creek, a small town of 3,700 residents in Maricopa County, Ariz., was fighting to preserve a 2,100-acre site that featured the only perennial stream in the desert county from developers who wanted to build a high-end resort and golf community. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., was trying to work out a land-swap deal with the National Forest Service, but that eventually failed. The bulldozers were firing up their engines, poised to raze Native American ruins, burial grounds and artifacts that covered the property.

"I didn't really want to get involved in it because it was a nasty deal," says Stapley, Maricopa County supervisor. "The developer was threatening to go ahead and develop it [and] local groups were trying to figure out how to buy it."

However, after visiting the site with his family one weekend and seeing the Native American relics and pristine environment for himself, he changed his mind. "I thought we ought to think of ways to purchase the land," Stapley says.

Stapley worked to convince then-Governor Jane Hull, the other four county supervisors and Cave Creek leaders to pool money to purchase the land. He organized tours of the site for those who seemed unconvinced. In 2001, the three governments bought the land for \$21 million and agreed to manage it together. The Spur Cross Ranch now is supervised by the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department, and its annual operating costs are paid by Cave Creek. "It's the first time in the country that a town, a county and the state joint ventured in a preservation effort of this kind," Stapley says.

Had Stapley never been involved in the deal, builders may have completed the resort by now. "There were times we all thought it may never happen," says Bill Scalzo, parks and recreation director for the county. "[Stapley] wouldn't give up. It's something that really distinguishes him."

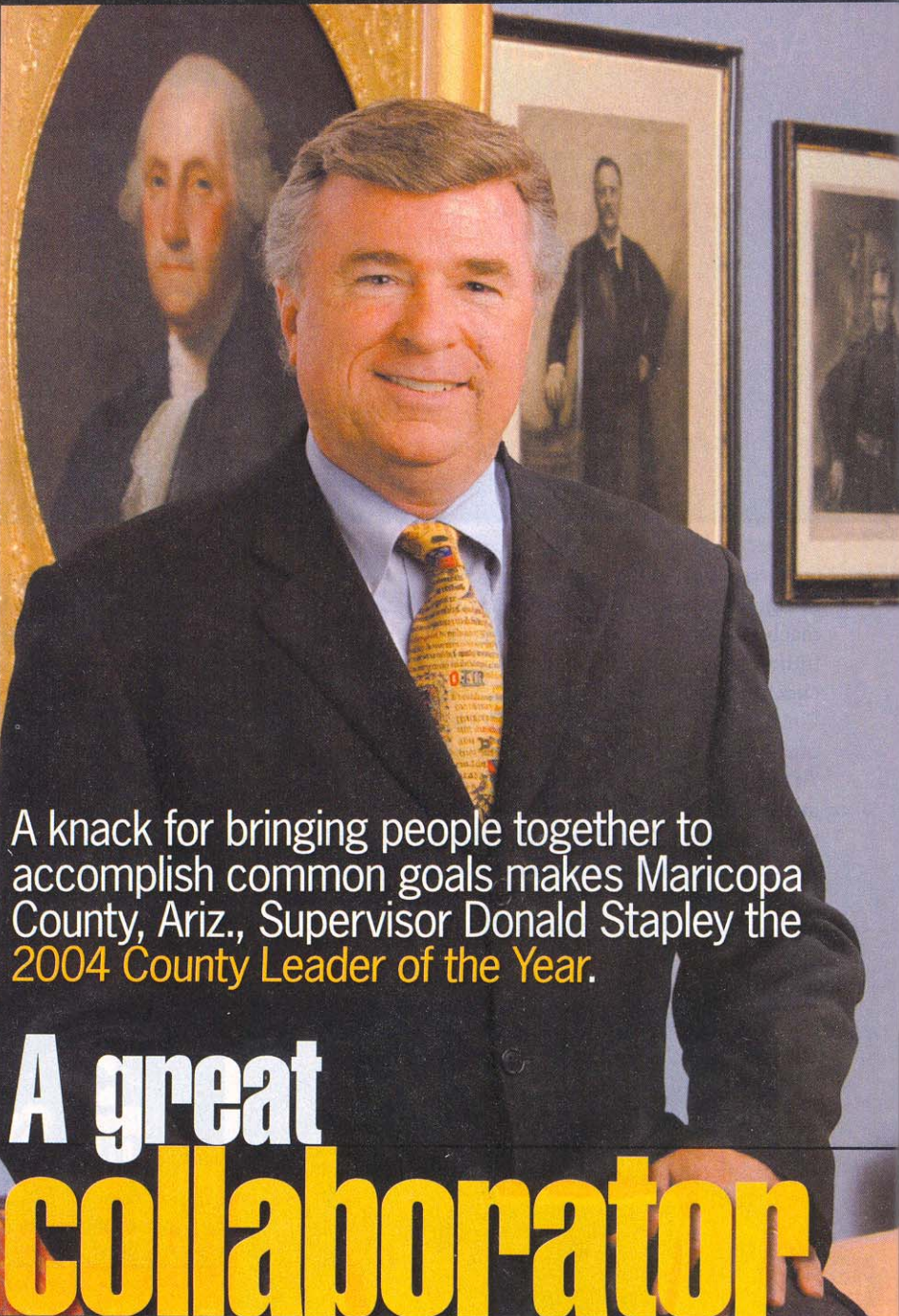
Stapley's ability to build the coalition to preserve the Spur Cross Ranch exhibited one of his strongest leadership

qualities. "He's very good at 'tenting,' bringing everybody in," says Mary Rose Wilcox, the longest serving member on the Maricopa County board and the only Democrat. "When we're dealing with issues, he's always able to pull together people that can give us some history and advice."

That talent has been put to use recently as Maricopa County has been struggling to meet the health care needs of its residents, to improve its transportation network and to cope with exponential residential growth. It also has helped him chair the National Association of Counties' (NACo) Large Urban

County Caucus (LUCC) for the last two and a half years. "He's humble. He's soft spoken but strong willed, and I think that's really key given the nature of the elected officials who are his peers," says Dalen Harris, NACo associate legislative director. "Don is always able to help members develop consensus on the issue that they can all support unanimously."

Using his collaborative skills, Stapley helped create a special health care district for Maricopa County that will transfer the support of the county's hospital and 11 clinics to an independent organization funded by property taxes. Approved by voters last November, the



A knack for bringing people together to accomplish common goals makes Maricopa County, Ariz., Supervisor Donald Stapley the 2004 County Leader of the Year.

A great collaborator



health system's operation will transfer to the district in January. Additionally, Stapley played an integral role in crafting a 20-year transportation plan that voters will be asked to fund with sales taxes in November. Those and other achievements highlight Stapley's leadership strengths and make him American City & County's 2004 County Leader of the Year.

### Restructuring health care

Stapley has a keen sense of the area's history because his family has been a large part of it, particularly in Mesa, a city the Stapleys helped found in the late 1800s. "There's been a tradition of service in my family that certainly affected me," Stapley says. His great grandfather helped write the state constitution, his grandfather was a firefighter in Phoenix, and his father served on the county hospital board for 20 years.

To help prepare him to meet the challenges of providing health care, Stapley served on the board of directors for a local Lutheran hospital for 10 years. The estimated 500,000 undocumented Mexican workers living in Maricopa County, stresses its health system. The county estimates it spent \$80 million on uncompensated health care for indigents last year. "We spend about 60 to 70 percent of our time on health care," says Fulton Brock, a fellow county supervisor.

Part of the problem stems from the hospital's outdated design. It was built 50 years ago, when individual rooms were rare. "Most of the rooms are wards [which] does not attract today's middle class," Brock says. "Our payer mix is imbalanced, and we don't have [many] people who can pay their bills."

Because the health care system was draining the county's budget, the Board of Supervisors considered selling it. Stapley, who was board chair in 2002, formed a 10-member task force to study alternatives. "[The hospital] was competing for the same dollars to build courts and jails and do the prosecution and public defense work," Stapley says. "Do you take care of the indigent poor from Mexico? Or do you take care of managing crime in the community?"

The task force recommended creating a special district that would be funded by property taxes and dedicated to the health system's operation. Because Maricopa County is not a charter government, but rather an arm of the state government, the state legislature had to allow the county to put a 20-year property tax on the November 2003 ballot.

The measure was approved in the legislature, and in November, residents approved the tax and the special district. "The average voter understood that for this system to close down, it would directly affect them even though they had never been there," Stapley says. "All the volume that we take care of at the county level would disperse into their hospitals and clinics in the suburbs."

In 2005, the district will begin levying the property tax, which will generate \$40 million in the first year and will rise with inflation. "The health care system was one that Maricopa County had to continually pump money into from its general spending budget," says Jim Sawyer, executive director for the Phoenix-based Arizona Association of Counties. "Don set out along with other talented people to get to the bottom of what was going on, how it could be

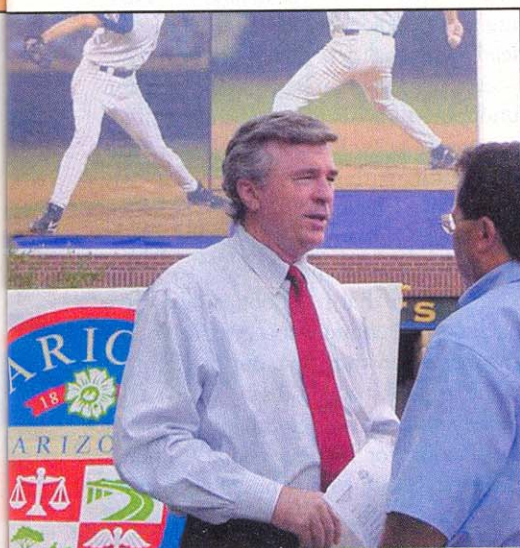
changed, how it could be more effective, and how it could be used better."

The health care district's board of directors will be elected in November and will have options for supporting itself that the county did not have, such as merging with other health care systems, competing for nursing talent and issuing bonds for infrastructure improvements. "The health care safety net in the county will still be in place to take care of the truly needy and indigent, yet it won't be caught up in the politics of the state house," Stapley says.

### Calling on Congress

Stapley's experience with Maricopa County's health care system prepared him well for LUCC's chairmanship. Last year, he was appointed by NACo president Karen Miller to lead the LUCC's lobbying efforts. The group chose uncompensated health care as one of its top lobbying priorities in 2003. "Don is the perfect person to carry that issue," says Patricia O'Bannon, vice chair of LUCC and Henrico County, Va., supervisor. "The unfunded medical care issues are important to counties specifically. In border states, the impacts are particularly hard on county hospitals."

As LUCC chair, Stapley focused on educating the federal government on uncompensated care's impact on counties. His committee met with Congress members, particularly Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., and Sen. McCain, who sponsored bills that will provide significant revenue to counties. For example, the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003 provided a \$10 billion increase in the federal medical assistance percentage, which will boost counties'



Pictured left is Maricopa County, Ariz., Supervisor Donald Stapley announcing a county resolution that opposed the Major League Baseball strike in 2002 at a press conference held at Bank One Ballpark, a county-owned stadium. Pictured right, Stapley (center) joins Commissioner Burrell Ellis (left) from Dekalb County, Ga., and Commissioner Gregg Goslin from Cook County, Ill., at a National Association of Counties' conference in Chicago.





reimbursements for Medicaid and other health services for indigent residents.

Additionally, the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 will provide \$250 million from fiscal year 2005 to fiscal year 2008 for emergency health services for undocumented aliens and increases disproportionate share hospital allotments. "[Stapley has] raised the profile within our organization and our advocacy development and policy development regarding [uncompensated health care]," Harris says.

Stapley's connections to Republicans in the White House and Congress have proven beneficial for NACo. He has been friends with Sen. McCain for 20 years, helping him on his first Congressional campaign. "He's very close to [Kyl and McCain] and to the administration, which is very helpful to us when Congress and the White House are controlled by Republicans," says Larry Naake, NACo executive director.

Stapley also worked this year with NACo President Karen Miller and the NACo Rural Action Caucus (RAC) to improve communication between the

but all in all, it's a matter of how do you move people and goods from one place to another," says Jane Halliburton, chair of the RAC and supervisor for Story County, Iowa. "The urban areas, the suburban areas and rural areas — we don't have to look at it as a competition. We actually complement one another."

### Keeping it moving

Stapley also devoted time last year to craft a 20-year transportation plan for the Maricopa County region. Serving on the 22-member Transportation Policy Committee for the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), Stapley represented the county's interests in the region's long-term plans. The region's half-cent sales tax for transportation is set to expire next year, so the group decided how the region could best meet its growing transportation needs.

The previous tax was dedicated to building freeways, but because the county has grown considerably in the last 20 years, the group determined that freeways were not the only way to solve the county's transportation needs. Some areas of the county wanted to

I was able to take to the policy committee a plan that sets up a system of checks and balances over 20 years and requires independent audits of the transit component — indeed any of the projects."

The first audit would occur in 2010, after Phoenix's light rail has been built. If the system is not generating expected ridership and revenue or meeting service levels, the auditors could discontinue expanding the system and replace it with another form of transit or transportation. However, the audits will apply to all parts of the plan, including freeways. "It was a brilliant plan," says F. Rockne Arnett, member of the Transportation Policy Committee and chair of the Citizens Transportation Oversight Committee. "It was a very fair and equitable plan, and it had the accountability measures."

The state approved the plan and allowed the county to put it on the ballot this November. "It was a tough battle just to get it on the ballot," Stapley says. "It will pass because it has such grassroots buy in, and that's the key to success in politics: building a base."

### Serving with satisfaction

While Stapley was a catalyst for changes locally and nationally, he prefers to share the credit with others who also were involved. "He's one of those leaders who has it right: they're in it for the public service," Sawyer says. "It's easy to admire Don's work because he's a quiet, effective leader. He doesn't draw a lot of attention to himself. He goes about doing the work that he knows is in the best interest of the people he serves."

That leadership style is particularly effective in large Maricopa County and at NACo. "He brings people together," Naake says. "It's not a dynamic, outgoing sort of leadership, but rather a quiet leadership that gets things done."

As Stapley enters this fall's election unopposed for his fourth term, it stands to reason he will continue serving his community with steady persistence. "My family and I have been fortunate in our lives," Stapley says. "We've received so much from other people and so much kind support that I feel obligated to give back to the community. At the end of the day, when they turn out the lights, I want to look back and say, 'I can't take money with me, but I can take a lot of satisfaction for helping people.' There's no better place to do that than county government."

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Maricopa County, Ariz., Supervisor Donald Stapley (second from right) joins officials at the opening of a new freeway that ran through his district. Other dignitaries included Scottsdale Mayor Mary Manross and former governor June Hull (third and fourth from right) and F. Rockne Arnett (far right), a member of the regional Transportation Policy Committee.

two groups and find common issues. "Don has been instrumental in helping to bring the Rural Action Caucus and the Large Urban County Caucus together to build that bridge to rural America," says Miller, Boone County, Mo., commissioner. "He recognizes that it takes both in order to get anything through Congress."

The steering committees for the two groups met for the first time in March to discuss transportation issues and the reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). "The transportation issues in Arizona and Iowa may be very different,

expand public transit service, including Phoenix, which plans to build a 20-mile light rail system. The resulting plan would extend the half-cent sales tax for 20 more years. The tax will generate \$9 billion in revenue, which will be divided among the county's regions according to population.

The use of the tax to support light rail was a controversial issue during the plan's construction. "There were some of us who weren't thrilled with the idea of spending a lot of money on light rail, and I was one of them, because it doesn't really serve any of the suburbs," Stapley says. "With the support of my colleagues,